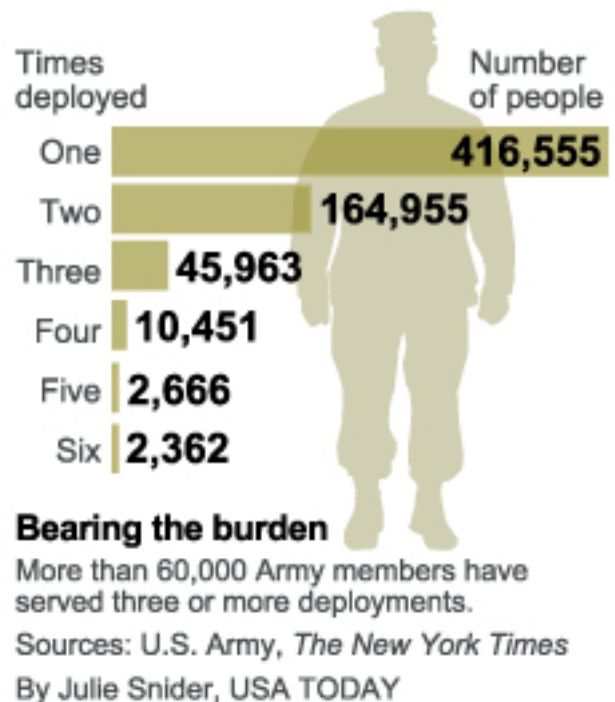


USA TODAY EDITORIAL

April 23, 2008

Fallout from 5 years in Iraq Overstretched.

The senior U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, will have "all the time he needs," President Bush vowed earlier this



month. But whether the United States has all the troops it needs - for Iraq, Afghanistan and other potential world hot spots - is another matter entirely.

While the surge of U.S. forces into Iraq has decreased the levels of violence there, it has increased the strains on the military, particularly the Army. Those pressures are showing up in a variety of troubling ways:

- Undue burdens. About 35% of deployed soldiers have served more than one tour; more than 5,000 are on their fifth or sixth tours. Despite Defense Secretary Robert Gates' order last year to minimize mandatory tour extensions known as "stop loss," the Army has had to accelerate that practice. From last May to this March, the number of soldiers affected rose 43% to 12,235.

Many of those soldiers had served their tours of combat and planned to leave the Army. Instead, in a sort of backdoor draft, they were required to extend their tours by an average of 6.6 months. The Army says this is needed for unit cohesion, but some commanders warn that stop loss has a devastating impact on morale.

- Recruiting problems. The demands on the Army have forced it to accept older soldiers and more recruits with conduct problems. In early 2006, the enlistment age limit was 35. It got pushed up to 40, then 42.

Meanwhile, the percentage of recruits needing a waiver to join the Army because of past misconduct or a criminal record has more than doubled since 2004. Now, those waivers are needed for one in eight recruits. Waivers issued to active-duty Army recruits with felony convictions jumped from 249 in 2006 to 511 last year.

- Rising costs. In 2006, the Army paid more than \$1 billion in bonuses to attract and retain soldiers, more than three times the bonuses paid before the war began. The Army Reserve paid \$315 million in recruiting and retention bonuses last year, a 46% increase over the year before. These payments raise unsettling questions about mercenary incentives in the military.

All the stresses are further reminders of the disproportionate sacrifices being borne by the relatively few in Iraq, and of the limitations facing U.S. policymakers. Willpower and determination are admirable virtues, but they are not the only determinants of how long the president can sustain his stay-the-course objective.

Underfunded.

An Army stretched to the breaking point is just one unanticipated consequence of five years of war in Iraq. Another is a refugee crisis triggered by the sectarian violence.

About 2 million Iraqis are living in often squalid conditions in Syria and Jordan, and their money is running out. As many, or more, are displaced within Iraq. As some refugees return, they are finding their homes occupied by other people, often of different groups. The Iraqi government needs international assistance, as happened in Bosnia, for a program to restore homes to their owners or move them elsewhere.

The United States has accepted shamefully few of the refugees from Iraq - including Iraqis who risked their lives for Americans as translators or drivers.

As of February 2007, the United States had taken in fewer than 500 since the war began in 2003. Under pressure, the Bush administration promised last year to take in 7,000 more, but even that figure was overly optimistic. Only 1,608 were resettled.

The administration blames bureaucratic delays. But the problems it cites - such as the need for Homeland Security interviews to keep out terrorists - have long been known about and could have been solved with more effort and imagination. After all, a small town in Sweden named Sodertalje absorbed almost as many Iraqi refugees - 1,100 - in one year.

The administration says it is aiming to take in 12,000 this year. But the United States has a moral obligation to take in more, and to help in other ways, because of the scale of the crisis triggered by the U.S. invasion.

Beyond failed promises in settling Iraqi refugees in the USA, the administration has provided only \$208 million to help displaced Iraqis - barely one-tenth of the \$2 billion that members of the International Rescue Committee's board believe is needed annually for up to four years.

This might even be a good investment. After the Vietnam War, for example, Vietnamese refugees became a cultural bridge and an engine of vibrant trade between the United States and Vietnam.

It is perhaps understandable that the administration has been dragging its feet. It would prefer that Iraqis return to Iraq, where their presence might add stability to a society depleted of educated professionals. But the truth is that the crisis has reached such a level that it can no longer be ignored, with fingers crossed that the refugees, somehow, will return home and be absorbed.